

This Earthly Paradise - Press Release

With 80 per cent of the earth's land mass given over to agriculture and the world's population having tripled in the last century, it is undeniable that the rapid increase in human industrial and agricultural activity throughout the 20th century has had a massive impact on the environment and has redefined our conception of the natural world, the meaning of wilderness, and our connection to it as a species. In recent years, scientists have documented various effects on animal populations, including species mutation, behavioural changes and population explosions and die-offs, many of which result from agricultural, commercial and industrial run-off, deforestation and other environmental degradations. Bats, amphibians, insects and birds are especially susceptible to these destabilizing influences.

In an unexpected reversal of this trend, the economic embargo imposed on Cuba in 1962 by the Kennedy presidency, which (in an effort to weaken the Castro government) stunted industrial development and halted the advancement of modern tourism and agriculture over the succeeding 50 years, has created the context for the preservation of many of Cuba's pristine ecosystems. This is due in large part to the practice of communal, organic farming, fostering a flourishing of endemic plant and wildlife species. But it is also remarkable that, by removing the pressures of human economic activity, the political tensions of the Cold War and the almost complete isolation of Cuba from its nearest neighbor have allowed for a sort of "entropic" revitalization of the Alejandro de Humboldt National Park on an unprecedented scale. The park was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2001, in view of its extreme biodiversity ranging over jungle, forest, river, mountain, ocean and coral reef habitats.

In "This Earthly Paradise" Tanya Chaly and Rebecca Reeve together examine the effects of human impact on the biosphere, but through quite different lenses. Rebecca Reeve's lush and verdant installation of photographic works drawn from her recent visits to the Humboldt National Park certainly contrast stylistically with Tanya Chaly's forensic suites of detailed and individually framed drawings - a "swarm" of insects, a "colony" of bats - a scientifically assembled display of biodiversity. On closer inspection these works betray more complex and unsettling themes. Amidst Chaly's drawing suites the viewer will discover pathologies and disease, parasitic infestations and mutations. In the case of amphibians it might be subtle imbalances in the delicate ecosystem being a direct result of industrial run-off polluting their habitat, as in "Tidings of Invisible Things" where the images of frogs assemble themselves in the form of an atrazine molecule. With the bats that colonize "Reservoir", it might be a number of naturally occurring viruses - lyssa, hendra, ebola - lurking within their populations and ready to spillover into human populations as we expand into their habitats. Reeve's work too shares a foreboding of imminent change as we are led to reflect on the potential shift in man's relationship to a virgin landscape that would inevitably result from an easing of the embargo against Cuba spurring an influx of tourism and introducing 21st century agricultural and manufacturing practices into the Cuban economy and culture. Chaly shows us what might already be happening right under our feet as a result of human activity, if we care to stop and look; Reeve shows us what kind of evolution might just be possible, if we simply care to stop.

For this exhibition Reeve presents selected works from her “Bay of Honey” series. These include familial portraits of communal farmers against a composite backdrop of foliage that she photographed during her time spent with these local communities in Cuba. The portraits are printed using a dye sublimation process onto aluminum. This lends them a jewel-like luminosity when arranged amidst her lush wallpaper depicting a verdant landscape. The installation relates the harmonious interconnection between people and place that she witnessed during her stay in the Nipe-Sagua-Baracoa Mountains of the Alejandro de Humboldt National Park. The wall of jungle is a backdrop that shapes the daily habits and livelihoods of the local people both literally and symbolically. The portrait of the beekeeper with his smoker - which uses the same incense present in the Catholic mass - also contains a symbolic reference to the integrity and purity of Cuba’s ecosystems that continue to flourish in the absence of industrial and economic growth. Reeve encapsulates the decade leading up to the current economic and political transition, showcasing an environment uncorrupted by local human activity, a complex and varied topography that has fostered one of the most biologically diverse tropical ecosystems hosting numerous endemic species of flora and fauna.

By contrast, Tanya Chaly presents us with much more clinical, or forensic, representation of biodiversity in which the human element is conspicuously absent or, at the very least, only indirectly referenced. In the selection and presentation of her subject matter, she draws upon the Victorian predilection for scientific curiosity, a desire to compress the marvels and curiosities of the natural world into the confines of a display case enmeshed with a scientific urge to classify and enumerate. But, far from eulogizing this obsession of another era with nature in the abstract, Chaly uses this format to draw our attention to more contemporary concerns as she traces the adverse effect of human consumer waste on certain species, and documents the pathologies and viral strains that might become prevalent as a result of human’s abnormal interactions with other species. Through her layered practice of charcoal graphite and pigment renderings of biological specimens and punctured drawings overlaying parasites, spores and other pathogens with the very species that carry them, Chaly’s scientifically rendered drawings blend the textbook aesthetic with a commentary on biological transitions amongst species. More generally in her work, she questions how civilization infiltrates ecosystems exploiting natural resources and wildlife as well as impacting the biological cycle. Her insect renderings, which make up the work “Inhaling the Spore”, represent the overall tension of our co-habitation with these creatures. At once repellent and beautiful, inherently macabre and somewhat alien to us, they are the key to ecosystem function. They are in the words of biologist E. O. Wilson “the little things that run the world”. Chaly’s puncture series too are created with symbolic gesture of infestation - the paper’s impaled surface eclipses the reverse drawing suggestive of the germination of bacteria spores like *Paenibacillus dendritiformis*. The latter are themselves a fascinating example, on a microscopic level, of the many self-regulating processes built into the natural world. As populations of these bacteria explode they control their own growth through cannibalism.

In this exhibition, both artists investigate how borders and classifications of the natural world, wildlife and industry are affected and shaped by human activity. Chaly focuses on natural history and the history of scientific enquiry from Victorian times to present, how modes of classification and organization of species, documentation and display, all

inform our understanding, and how our understanding of pathologies, diseases, viruses and parasites blur the concepts of the natural and unnatural, the normal and abnormal. Contrast this with Reeve's interest in the significance of the pristine state of an ecosystem and humankind's interaction with it on a social level, set in the context of social and geopolitical forces. Both Reeve and Chaly are interested in the symbiosis of place and people. Reeve's work specifically looks at how the Cuban landscape shapes the local people, their lifestyle and connection to the land, without ignoring that these delicate balances are ultimately subject to broader external forces. Chaly's is an exploration of the human relationship to the natural world as scientific observer tied with an awareness of our impact and interrelationship with other species on an often less visible scale. "This Earthly Paradise" examines humankind's constantly shifting relationship to the biosphere. Even as the natural world continually navigates towards equilibria despite humanity's overwhelming impact, we are reminded of the need for a healthy balance between the expansion of civilization and the preservation of a diverse ecosphere, reminded that our knowledge and understanding of the natural world is partial and in continual evolution, and reminded that the biological world is driven by a multitude of processes that we are mostly unaware of and that are largely out of our control.

The work presented by Rebecca Reeve in this exhibition was produced with the assistance of the Explorers Club Artist-in Exploration Award sponsored by Rolex. Both artists have been recent recipients of this award and wish to thank both Rolex and the Explorers Club for their generous support. Tanya Chaly would also like to acknowledge the support of the Constance Saltonstall Art Foundation in producing her work for this exhibition and would like to thank the Natural History Museum, London, for allowing her access to their collection.



Tanya Chaly (b. 1970, Sydney, Australia) received her BFA and Post Graduate Diploma from the University of New South Wales and studied Histoire d'Art et Archeologie at the University of Burgundy. She lives and works in New York City. She has exhibited with the Masur Museum of Art, Louisiana, SUNY Geneseo NY, the Annmarie Sculpture Garden and Arts Center, and Five Points Gallery, Connecticut. She is the 2014 recipient of the Explorers Club Artist-in Exploration Award sponsored by Rolex, a recipient of a Constance Saltonstall Fellowship in 2014, residencies at the Vermont Studio Center (2013) and NSW Ministry for the Arts Gunnerly Studio (2006), and winner of the Willoughby City Art Prize, and Musswellbrook Open Art Prize. Her work belongs to the permanent collections of The Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, Stanthorpe Regional Art Gallery Queensland, Nortel Australia, and the Crown Casino Collection in Melbourne.

Rebecca Reeve (b. 1973, London, United Kingdom) received her BFA from Bath Spa University and Masters in Visual Art at the University of South Wales. She lives and works in New York City. Her documentary photography practice focuses on the relationship to and subsistence on the environment in Latin America, particularly in Cuba, and she has exhibited with La Biennale de Montreal (Canada), Freies Museum,

Berlin (Germany), Museum of Latin American Art, (Buenos Aires), and the Masur Museum of Art, (Louisiana). She was the 2013 recipient of the Explorers Club Artist-in-Exploration Award sponsored by Rolex and her work is housed in the permanent collection of the Fort Wayne Museum of Art.